DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 261 627 HE 018 726

AUTHOR Bernstein, Alison
TITLE Equity Issues for Women in Higher Education: Getting beyond the Numbers Game.
PUB DATE 85
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (69th, Chicago, IL, March 31-April 4, 1985).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Affirmative Action; College Students; *Educational Opportunities; *Females; Feminism; Higher Education; Minority Groups; *Research Problems; Role Perception; *Sampling; Sex Discrimination; *Womens Education; *Womens Studies

ABSTRACT

Equity topics that need special attention from higher education researchers are discussed. It is argued that focusing on the increased numbers of women students, faculty, and administrators may disguise more complex issues. It is advocated that when researchers propose to study "women," they should identify which women are being examined. When undifferentiated statistics on women are used, minority women in general, and particular groups of minority women (e.g., southern black women), will be overlooked or misrepresented. While the history, roles, and contributions of middle class white women "notables" are being covered in college courses, Black, Chicano, and Native American women are rarely encountered as subjects of study outside of sociology and social work courses. Questions remain about women's degree patterns and areas of specialization. Studies of the educational goals and experiences of women students at universities, the less selective community colleges, and minority institutions are needed. More information is also needed concerning: 18- to 25-year-old women's views on sex discrimination, opportunities for young women to combine careers and marriages, and male attitudes on campus toward women's liberation and its impact on male roles. (SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Alison Bernstein
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

AERA Panel

1985

ED261627

Equity Issues for Women in Higher Education:

Getting Beyond the Numbers Game

by Alison Bernstein,
The Ford Foundation

When Michael Nettles asked me to participate as a panelist in this session, I agreed with some trepidation. I am not a trained researcher in higher education, and, since 1982, I have not even been a practitioner. Instead, I have worked as a program officer in a foundation funding the practitioners and researchers. So what I want to talk about today emerges out of that experience--reading proposals, analyzing the research they report, and wondering whether there are other issues we are not tackling. (Let me hasten to add that I have compiled this idiosyncratic list of topics in the equity area as my personal choices. They do not reflect any particular priority of the Ford Foundation).

When I think about equity issues for women in higher education, I break that concern down into three categories:

1. women as subjects of study
2. women as students
3. women as employees and employers in higher education institutions.

Within these categories, much research and analysis has already been done, but it has been uneven across the categories. Because of federal legislation (Title VI, Title IX, affirmative action regulations, etc.), we constantly collect data on what I call "the numbers game". . . how many women students?

HE 017 726

what kinds of institutions are they attending? how many women faculty? who has tenure? where?, etc. Thanks to these federally mandated programs, and the funding the federal government routinely provides, we already know some general patterns:

1) since 1980, women have constituted more than half of the undergraduate student body and their participation in higher education is rising.

2) the number and percentage of women receiving Ph.D.s is increasing while the percentage of men receiving the degree is declining, although men still outnumber women as doctoral students.

3) women are a slowly increasing percentage of the college presidents and chief academic officials throughout higher education, not just in women's colleges and community colleges.

4) women are being hired in the lower ranks, but most have still not passed into tenure positions in any great number.

5) women faculty are still concentrated primarily in the "sex-stereotyped" fields. . . the humanities, "soft" social sciences, and human service fields like teaching, nursing, allied health, secretarial, counseling, personnel, retailing, social work.

6) women are also an increasing percentage of students enrolling in professional schools--law, business, medicine, engineering, etc.

In all, there has been marked improvement over the last twenty years in terms of women's participation in higher education as students, administrators and faculty. And yet, I am not comforted by the general trends I have already mentioned. Importantly, overall positive trends may disguise more complex issues which lie behind this picture of improvement. The numbers game troubles me because it only talks about undifferentiated women -- because we

seem disinterested in disaggregating the figures to understand what is happening to certain groups of women. In particular, what are the patterns of minority and low-income women's participation in higher education. If I were critiquing this panel, I would say that Mike Nettles has inadvertantly created the wrong impression by segregating women as a separate category from blacks, Hispanics, asian-Americans and others. I hope I will not disappoint you, but my remarks focus squarely on minority women, not as one group (another convenient way of trivializing issues of race, class and gender), but rather, as a way of gaining a deeper understanding of what is happening to women in higher education. I hope my male colleagues on the panel will also take this point to heart by disaggregating their analysis in terms of the differences between male and female particination rates.

My first overall concern about women's equity is to make clear that whenever a researcher proposes to study "women" he/she should identify which women are being examined? Where does the data base come from? Is the sample of respondents large enough to include minority women so that appropriate generalizations are possible? This theme seems deceptively simple, and yet, if researchers are not careful in the construction of their projects, minority women in general, and particular groups of minority women (e.g. Puerto Rican women and Southern black women), will be overlooked or misrepresented.

My second overall concern about equity issues for women in higher education is our unfortunate tendency to use existing male models as the yardstick of improvement. Perhaps it is inevitable, but I worry about taking the institutional structure and practices as they are and looking for evidence of women's acceptance into them, rather than trying to discover how women have changed the policies and practices of their respective institutions. Perhaps the best way to understand this point is to consider the question of women

faculty. Is success to be measured according to the prevailing research university model of less teaching, more publishing? If that model persists, what does it do to the solidarity of women in such an institution? Will we adopt prevailing attitudes about our secretaries and support staff? What about junior colleagues and teaching assistants? What about teaching itself and its role in the university? Should successful women faculty abandon their students? Spend less time with them? Are their male colleagues taking up the slack? To talk about equity usually means helping women to get what men have. Another way of thinking about the relationship of women to men in the academy is to think about encouraging men to want what women have.

With these two overall points, let me suggest four equity topics which I believe deserve fresh attention from higher education researchers. This is by no means a complete list, however, the topics point to several themes which need deeper and more sensitive investigation.

1) Women a subjects of study: How are we to assess whether there has been any change in the content of the curriculum over the last twenty years? Separate women's studies courses have increased. In fact, there are 450 separately organized programs of courses offered throughout the country, but we have no reliable data regarding which students are exposed to the study of women as part of their core undergraduate curriculum, and now they receive this "integrated' perspective. I will go further, it is not clear whether women's studies has moved beyond "preaching to the converted", to attract male faculty members and male students. Moreover, when I say women as subjects of study, I wish to disaggregate that question with regard to minority women. It is possible that the history, roles and contributions of middle class white women "notables" is beginning to show up in the large enrollment introductory courses, but I am skeptical about the degree to which black women, Chicanas

and Native American women are ever encountered as subjects of study outside sociology and social work courses.

2) What Women Study. Are there changes in the degree patterns of women over the last decade? Are more moving into the sciences as a percentage of the total female student enrollment? I have heard several anecdotes which suggest that undergraduates today are leaving the humanities for business majors, is this equally true for men and women? Does the type of institution (women's college, historically black college) have an impact upon the types of majors chosen? Are there any patterns of shifting majors as a result of spending two years at an institution, or are women entering with a firm sense of vocation and career?

3) Women as Students: A cursory look at enrollment patterns across higher education suggests that the percentage of women in community colleges and historically black colleges is even greater than national norms. The last figure read reported that women were 51 percent of all undergraduates, and 55 percent of the undergraduate population at community colleges. In some urban community colleges with which I am familiar, that figure is even greater, especially when one compares percentages of black women with black men. Historically, we know something about the educational goals and experience of women students in the Ivy League, the historically women's colleges and some of the more prestigious small private colleges. This is due in part to the fact that researchers could get funding to do studies of these women elites. Now it is hard to get research money, period. But I would argue that studies of the educational goals and experiences of women students in universities, less selective community colleges and minority institutions are needed, particularly with regard to the question of whether these women students are encouraged to enter less sex-stereotyped fields and majors.

4) Women as Students: There have been some journalistic accounts which suggest the current drop of women students takes the women's movement for granted, and is part of a "post" feminist generation, whatever that means. I would argue, that, apart from the ACE/HERI freshman surveys, we know very little about 18-25 year old women's views on sex discrimination, and/or the opportunity they have to combine careers and marriages as an adult wage earner. Moreover, we know precious little about male attitudes on campus towards women's liberation and its impact on male roles. Has there been a lasting change in the value of gender relations among college students/ What form does this change take in term of issues of sexual relations, concepts of child rearing, and even attitudes towards pornography. As the generation of women who grew up during the 1960s/1970s ages, we cannot assume we understand how students are perceiving their options, or that they even have options.

In selecting these form topics, I hope I have shifted the nature of the questions regarding women's equity issues from preoccupations with women faculty and administrators and their career advancement to issues directly affecting the students we teach and what we deem important is our classrooms. Research on these topics cannot be qualified simply as a "numbers game." Instead, they require us to find qualitative ways of understanding the learning environment.